

## County tries new tack to fight homelessness

■ Approach would provide home first, then job, health services

BY C. BENJAMIN FORD  
STAFF WRITER

Montgomery County's homeless could find new homes before they receive the government services that attack the reasons for their homelessness, under a new approach under consideration by the County Council.

An estimated 1,200 people a day are homeless, with 800 people considered short-term homeless because of an economic crisis and 400 are considered to have chronic housing problems.

Current efforts put the homeless into temporary shelters and then offer them assistance. They might receive job training to help them find work. They might enter health programs if they suffer from mental illness or addiction.

But the new effort under consideration would follow programs used in other jurisdictions that first takes care of the housing needs of the homeless and then addresses their other issues.

The initiative, known as "Housing First" in other communities, works to get the homeless into permanent, stable housing as quickly as possible, said Steven R. Berg, vice president for programs and policy at the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

By taking care of their housing needs instead of the problems that led to their homelessness may sound "counter intuitive," but Berg told a council hearing Thursday

that it makes the other efforts such as employment programs or substance abuse treatment more effective if those in need don't have to worry about where they are going to sleep at night.

"You solve that problem first," Berg said. "All those things work better if the person is in housing."

Other communities that have tried "Housing First," such as Columbus, Ohio, have cut their homeless population nearly in half in a few years.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said the county needs to be willing to look at new approaches.

"We had a 10-year plan to eliminate homelessness, but the truth is we're in seven years of a 10-year plan and it's not working," Leventhal said.

Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown said a county with a million people and a \$4 billion budget should find a way to keep 1,200 people from having to live on the streets or in homeless shelters.

"It just seems to me in a county with the resources we have we should be a way to come up with a solution to the homeless problem," Knapp said.

The council planned to discuss the issue during the next budget process. Leventhal said he did not think the county would have to spend more money, but would be able to reallocate funds for a new effort.